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SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Stealing My Mother From Me: The Horrors of Conservatorship

Theft, lies, deception, and the wrongful death of our loved ones by deceitful predators, all for the almighty dollar

By **Duane Farrant** - May 31, 2024

Some states call it conservatorship. Others call it guardianship. But whatever you call it, it can be deadly. It can lead to theft, lies, deception, and the wrongful death of our loved ones by deceitful predators, all in pursuit of the almighty dollar.

Consider my mother's story. Guardianship and the legal system stole her from me. It stole her money, my money, the money designated for my disabled brother, and the house where I took care of her for years. Because of the conservator in charge, the lawyers and judges involved, and others embedded in this toxic system, she lost any say in anything. So did I.

She was put on at least one antipsychotic drug that, according to black-box warnings, shouldn't have been prescribed for someone with dementia. She died. And for three days afterward, no one bothered to tell me. By then those in charge had demonized me. Shoved me aside and left me in the dark. She had been pulled away from me, the one who had looked after her best interests and held her power of attorney.

How this all happened is a long, difficult, complicated story, and I won't be able to tell it in complete detail. But I want to start with who she was, what she meant to all who loved her, and why she deserved decent treatment by all.

Norma Claire Duffy Farrant was born in Kansas City, MO, on October 29, 1929. She was the youngest of six children, growing up in the Great Depression in a family of eight that struggled to survive. She and her siblings all served their country, with her mom and her three sisters all working in the munitions plants and her brothers fighting in our country's World War II. Luck was with them, as they came out alive and uninjured—but for the terrors they envisioned. At one point my Uncle Bill was in a tank with four others, and one of them put his head out. It was shot off, ending up in his lap. Horrific. My uncle was awarded the Bronze Star. And my mother, like all of her siblings, wanted a better life for herself after the war.

She learned accounting and then, changing course, attended a teaching college in Warrensburg, MO. Shortly thereafter, she and her sister Virginia decided to move to Hollywood, CA, where she landed a teaching job in an elementary school and at night taught English to immigrants. Mother married in 1958, giving birth to three children: me; my disabled brother, whom I've assisted for years; and our sister, now estranged. Ten years later, my parents were divorced, and in 1969 my mother moved us from Hollywood to Newbury Park, CA, where she purchased her first home with a Veterans Administration loan and taught in high schools.

For roughly 45 years, until an injury forced her to retire, she gave her life to her family and teaching others. She worked hard to give *us* better lives while sacrificing her own happiness. Mother never remarried. She did everything for us. She cared about her family and others, putting her children first and herself last.

That's the kind of person my mother was.

But somehow—and this is where her story turns complicated and hard—she stopped being seen as a human being by those with power. Once she got roped into the system and bounced from one elder care facility to another, she became nothing to them. Not a veteran. Not a teacher who had spent her lunch hour with kids and then tutored them after school. Not a loving mother who had sacrificed everything for her kids.

She became, instead, someone to exploit.

A long saga begins

It all started the first week in April of 2015, the day after my mother and I took a trip to Salinas, KS, to pick up a grandfather clock.

My truck broke down, and we were stuck overnight. By the time we got home she hadn't slept well for the past few days, keeping me up, too. Back home the next day, she sliced her finger in the kitchen—all kinds of food out, an electric mixer in the sink. Just chaos. When I asked her what happened, she said she was trying to kill herself.

Trying to kill herself? Clearly, she wasn't. But I was doing my best to love and assist my aging mother with whatever aid I could find, and I had to take this seriously.

So I band-aided her finger and put her to bed, figuring her past few sleepless nights hadn't helped.

A little while later, I checked in on her and asked again what had happened. Her reply was the same. Was my mother truly suicidal? I didn't know. But this seemed like a cry for help. I felt I should do something about it, and so I tried to find the nearest place that might assist in a crisis. We were living in rural Missouri, and I could only find one location close enough to help. They indicated they would admit her. After we arrived we were assigned a counselor, but after about 15 minutes, the counselor said my mother could not be admitted and suggested I take her to an emergency room some 40 miles away.

So began a nearly unending story of back-and-forth phone calls, car drives, interviews, questionnaires, assessments, and directives to this facility, then that facility. One place was maybe going to admit her, then another—all while I was removing sharp items from the home so Mother would be safe. And she was still keeping me awake.

At one point, the counselor called back and indicated a hospital would take her. I was not ready for this, as I was so exhausted, and I asked her to call back after I had a few hours of sleep. She called again. Please, I told her, I need a bit of sleep before I drive her there, as the hospital was some 110 miles away. Okay, the woman said. But Mother was keeping me awake, so I called again and asked if she could be picked up. I was told she would be taken directly to the hospital.

Norma and Duane Farrant about eight years ago.

Instead, a case worker arrived and about 10 additional people, most of them just gabbing away on my porch. While my mother was trying to take a shower, several barged in. The lack of thoughtfulness in their behavior alarmed me. And why send all these people? I felt lied to, as my mother and I were both disrespected by their presence. She had been through hell, and these unwanted people were making the situation much worse.

Two days later, after yet more complications, mother was settled into the hospital. But before long, her insurance announced they wouldn't cover it (my mother "didn't meet the criteria"), and so I went home and—following the hospital's guidelines—secured the windows, the doors, the fridge. I also informed Senior Services of my actions. I told Mother if she wanted to go outside, we would have to go together.

A friend helped me out, but there were problems. Mother kept spitting her pills out, over flowing the toilet, tossing her camera and glasses into the trash and she told me she was blind, then later apologized and said she wasn't. "I knew that," I said.

Clearly, my mother needed help. *I* needed help, too. I couldn't do this alone. But where could we find that help? What were we to do?

Becoming the bad guy

Less than two weeks after picking up Mother from the hospital, I had made multiple calls in search of someplace, somewhere, that could provide some kind of aid. No return calls. Spent and tired beyond description, I did what so many people caring for loved ones in distress do with no other recourse, not anticipating the harm it can cause: I dialed 911 and requested an ambulance and specifically told them to keep it to a minimum of people.

It was my last option. Initially, it seemed like a good move. A sheriff showed up—a decent man—along with the paramedics. Two hours later she was settled in at a hospital, a different one from the previous place. They said she would be there for two days before being moved to a residential center I'd suggested. I told them I had a POA health directive for her, and I'd be there in the morning. Great! She was getting some help, or so I thought.

When I showed up the next morning, she wasn't there. Without my permission or even knowledge—without even calling me, though they later lied about that—they'd shipped her off to an entirely different hospital some 90 miles away. Off I went to this other hospital, where I was allowed just half an hour with my mother.

From there, things only got worse. And worse. And worse.

In the subsequent days I made so many phone calls, and got so frustrated, that finally a caseworker took my frustration the wrong way… and called someone to report that I was suicidal.

Suicidal?

Angry, yes. Fed up with this system that was built to (supposedly) help people in distress but only makes things worse for their families and themselves, absolutely. But, no, I wasn't suicidal.

When a cop showed up with a caseworker, he said they wanted to talk to me about suicide. I told them to leave, as I'd had enough of their kind. When I tried to shut my door, the cop wrestled with me, trying to keep me from going inside. Over the next 10-plus hours they terrorized me, shutting off my power and—according to reports I later dug up—surrounding my 19-acre property with six police cars that flashed their lights and blasted their PA system into the early hours of morning.

According to these same reports, guns were drawn and pointed in my direction.

Throughout the night, the 911 operator called repeatedly, maybe 100 times. I told them to stop. I told the cops to leave me alone. They were trespassing and terrifying me, as I had no intentions of harming myself. I even called a news station, as I was in fear.

Finally, around 4:30 a.m. I agreed to see a psychologist; a nice woman who agreed there was nothing wrong with me and sent me home. But that wasn't the end of it—not the demonization and even criminalization of me as I tried to help my mother, and not the end of her ordeal, either. It was only the beginning.

With no sleep and a sick chihuahua to boot, I called the hospital to check in and see when I could pick up my mother. They told me I couldn't, not after what happened the night before. When I demanded to know why and requested a meeting to discuss Mother's condition, they refused. The next day, speaking with a lawyer in legal aid offices, I learned of a court hearing. This was news to me. Why wasn't I told? According to the lawyer, they had me down as the "bad guy."

That was me: the bad guy. The guy trying to get answers. The guy trying to get some help for his mother.

No one would give me any information. Not the hospital, family services, or the courthouse where I'd filed a petition for a hearing. What the hell was going on here? I wasn't allowed to bring my mother home and had no clue what was going on, which was destroying whatever sanity I had left. And my mother, too, had no idea what was going on, as I hadn't picked her up. She was there alone.

Again, things got worse. And worse. And worse.

The rules didn't matter

For 11 months, my mother was held in a toilet of an institution. For 11 months, I could not see her or hear her voice. For 11 months, she was on a "no call" list, and she wasn't allowed to speak with any family or friends, the cruelest punishment for a woman who did not deserve it. Who does this to people? And why?

Eventually, my mother was ordered to California to live with my estranged sister. Five months later, she came back to Missouri. Soon after that, my sister filed for conservatorship. Instead, professional conservator Angelique Friend was appointed, and thereafter the California probate courts stepped in—despite the fact that we were in Missouri, and despite my power of attorney—and took my home, which mother had signed over to me in a quitclaim years before, though her name was erroneously never removed from the deed. They took my mother's interest in another home and, over time, depleted her estate down to zero. (Poppy Helgren, who wrote about her late father's own nightmare experience, endured under the same conservator.)

Around that time she was placed in an elder-care residential facility that I could tell, right from the start, was a house of horrors. On my first visit there, I found her with her hair completely shaved off, with scabs and bruises on her face. Mother was wearing hand-me-down clothing. She had no cane, no walker, no hearing aids, no glasses. People aren't supposed to be placed in facilities without such things. But the rules didn't matter, or so it seemed.

All of this was done against my objections and against the wishes and instructions of my mother. She never asked or wanted to be under the control of a conservator and expressed her desires in a video, in the paperwork, and on the phone with me, pleading with me to pick her up time and time again. But she wasn't heard by anyone in charge. She wasn't even allowed to appear in court. Also disregarded: the Farrant family living trust with a "special needs" clause, intended to help my disabled brother in his time of need. Unknown to me, a judge allowed her trust to be modified, by proxy—drastically changed it—and the estate was completely depleted. I ask: How do you find a person incompetent, mentally ill, but then change her living trust, indicating she agreed to said changes? What a joke the legal system is.

Aside from a couple of emails in late 2015 or so, Angelique Friend never communicated with me. I had virtually no knowledge and no say, any longer, about anything involving my mother's care.

This felt so strange to me. I'd taken care of my mother's bills for about 13 years, and looked out for her person for more than 11. From that day forward, she never had a late payment or did without food, housing, or anything else. I helped take care of her bills as well as my brother's, and I kept close tabs on her health.

After she was removed from me, I couldn't. Again, I had no say. When she was placed on the antipsychotic Risperdal, she became a zombie, of sorts; she would not talk much at all. According to the drug's black-box warning: "Elderly patients with dementia-related psychosis treated with antipsychotic drugs are at an increased risk of death." But they put her on the antipsychotic anyway—possibly others, too—and no one was telling me anything. No one informed me of the risks.

And in the 88-plus years of Mother's life until then, she was never diagnosed with schizophrenia, traumatic seizures or heart troubles, all three of which were mentioned on her death certificate alongside breast cancer. She did have a history of that. The rest of it was not the truth. No hallucinations or cardiac problems, at least, not until she was prescribed antipsychotics. And seizures? She never had those. Not that I knew of, so I assumed this was a lie, too. But then again, did they ever tell me what was going on? NO!

She left the world, and I was left in the dark

This is what I knew: My mother wasn't broken until she was kidnapped and trafficked by the court system and fed black-box drugs. Before that she was a present, caring person. Before that she was loved. She wasn't neglected. She didn't have bruises and cuts and scabs on her face. She didn't have an infection in both eyes. She wore clothes that were clean, that fit her, that weren't worn thin. She had a home. She wasn't moved from facility to facility, state-to-state, becoming yet more controlled and neglected and ill treated along the way. At one point she was housed in a center that was later revealed to employ a rapist.

An anonymous staff member at one of the facilities did inform me, near the end of her life, that she had suffered several falls and had only seen a dentist a couple of times. No work was done on her teeth except to remove them all. And at no point did the conservator inform me of anything—not the falls and E.R. visits, not the doctor or dental visits. Not her life-threatening bout of COVID. Nothing.

And then she left this world. Did someone tell me? The facility? The conservator? Anyone? Of course not. After three days of phone calls, checking how she was doing, I was informed that she'd died three days before. It took me years to obtain any of her medical records; I'm convinced this was a stalling tactic to prevent any lawsuit before the statute of limitations ran out.

Over the years, my brother and I filed complaints against the conservator and others, and we petitioned for a criminal investigation into her death. I directly contacted a homicide detective in Ventura County, CA, describing my concerns and what I regard as a cover-up in her egregious abuse and lack of care. I noted that I had previously filed a complaint of elder abuse.

Nothing has come of anything, even after some 40 plus letters and phone calls. Not one person helped, and many just didn't bother to respond.

Our beloved mother was mistreated, cheated, abused mentally, and alienated from her family by her conservator and the courts that pulled her away and vilified me—making me the enemy, making her more isolated, exposing her to so much harm—until she passed away on November 7, 2021.

She is in Heaven with her family and friends. But she shouldn't have arrived there so soon. For that I blame the black-box drugs. For that I blame the conservator, the courts, the system that made me the enemy and did enormous damage to the woman who brought me into this world—the woman I loved and looked out for, seeing to her needs.

Instead, people in this system of "care" lied, cheated, and stole, ignoring my mother's health, desires, and well being until it killed her. This is what happens—not just to her, but to many. Documents get ignored. Cronies get appointed, all of them enmeshed within a corrupt network that leads toward the destruction of families.

The system stole my home, too. And now, on Medicaid, I've got little to live on. I don't even have the money to get my Mother a nice headstone. I pray someday I can afford one.

God bless her. May she finally rest in peace.

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